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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the attitudes of both males and females regarding their perceptions of themselves, spouse and locus of control, and the role that children may play in that assessment. To determine if men and women view themselves differently subsequent to having children, the Rosenberg self concept scale, the Ferguson Locus of Control scale, and author-devised life satisfaction items were administered to 171 married parents between the ages of 30 and 70. Between group t-tests revealed no significant differences between husbands and wives on the measures of self esteem, locus of control, and perceptions of weight problems and sleep deprivation. T-tests did reveal that husbands were more likely than wives to report feeling they got insufficient exercise, and wives were more likely to report feeling that their spouses spent an excessive amount time viewing sports on television. Wives were significantly more likely than husbands to report feeling that they had sacrificed career for family. Correlational analyses were performed in order to assess the relationship between locus of control and self-esteem for both groups of participants. A significant relationship between these variables was obtained for both male and female participants of this study. (Contains 22 references and 2 tables.) (Author)

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Educating Students about Parents:

Husbands' Versus Wives' Attitudes About Self

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2003

Abstract

This study assessed the attitudes of both males and females regarding their perceptions of themselves, spouse and locus of control, and the role that children may play in that assessment. To determine if men and women view themselves differently subsequent to having children, the Rosenberg self concept scale, the Ferguson Locus of Control scale, and author-devised life satisfaction items were administered to 171 married parents between the ages of 30 and 70. Between groups t- tests revealed no significant differences between husbands and wives on the measures of self esteem, locus of control, and perceptions of weight problems and sleep deprivation. T-tests did reveal that husbands were more likely than wives to report feeling they got insufficient exercise, and wives were more likely to report feeling that their spouses spent an excessive amount of time viewing sports on television. Wives were significantly more likely than husbands to report feeling that they had sacrificed career for family. Correlational analyses were performed in order to assess the relationship between locus of control and self-esteem for both groups of participants. A significant relationship between these variables was obtained for both the male and female participants of this study.

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Introduction

Education, income, work status, age, and race have been shown to influence a persons' attitude toward socially appropriate roles for men and women as well as family structure (Collins, 1989; Dugger, 1988; Glass, 1992; Kane, 1992; Potucheck, 1992; Sorenson & McLanahan, 1987; Wilkie, 1993). Studies evaluating the relationship of labor in the family structure concluded that maternal employment has an impact on these gender-related attitudes (Keith, 1988; Selkow, 1984; Willetts-Bloom & Nock, 1994).

In an examination of trends across a forty-year time span, Thornton and Young-Demarco (2001) investigated a variety of family matters and how social attitudes toward these matters have changed from 1960 to the 1990's. Their study examined the cultural and social changes in perspectives on marriage, divorce, premarital sexual involvement, traditional gender roles, extramarital affairs, children born out of wedlock, and the decision of some couples not to bear children. While investigating these factors, this study also looked at changes in attitude toward what constitutes freedom and how it is defined. In addition, equality of roles across gender was observed, as were changes in family structure over time. General trends were, including increasing social acceptance of divorce, more equality in status across the sexes, and greater endorsement of individualistic lifestyles. Couples who decide to cohabitate before marriage and couples opting not to reproduce were found to be much more socially accepted and tolerated by contemporary society. It was also noted that many young adults still highly value marriage and respect the importance of family interactions and responsibility.

Egalitarianism has increased substantially recent decades, while societal demands for conformity have been significantly reduced. In the middle of the 1980's, the majority of Americans still valued a solid marriage and good family life; both were seen as a high priority (Hill & Yeung, 1999; Thornton, 1989). Some Americans have suggested that a return to more conservative and traditional values and lifestyles might be valuable. This group is generally opposed to many of today's more liberalized attitudes, such as those endorsing sexual relations out of wedlock. These differences between Americans who tend more toward egalitarianism and those who support more traditional views of family life have generated what has been described as the "culture wars" that currently dominate American politics (Hunter, 1991). Additionally, there is disagreement about whether or not the American family is in decline (K. Davis, 1937/1997; Durkheim, 1892/1978; Popenoe, 1988, 1993) or simply changing in various ways that are not necessarily bad (Coontz, 2000; Fletcher, 1962/1973; Goode, 1963/1970).

The Thornton and Young-Demarco (2001) results suggest that both men and women were more likely to endorse more egalitarianism view of gender roles in the 1980s than in the 1960s. Interestingly, this shift in favor of egalitarianism leveled off in the late 1990's, with some indication of a slight reversal. Viewpoints on marriage varied widely among data sets and respondents in this analysis. Although the desire to marry later has been a steadily increasing and may be affecting marriage rates in America (which are decreasing), most those surveyed rejected the idea that remaining single was beneficial. This study found growing disagreement over married people were happier

than their single peers, yet most respondents continue to endorse the importance of a good marriage.

Results regarding the attitudes toward divorce were mixed. General acceptance of divorce has increased from 1987-1992, yet many respondents also indicated that divorce should be reserved for extreme situations. The data pertaining to premarital sex issues showed an increase in sexual activity between unmarried individuals and broader acceptance of it in the 1960's and 1970's. Unmarried cohabitation has steadily increased from 1970 to the 1990s. High school seniors surveyed not only indicated that cohabitation was more acceptable, but also saw it as a positive option and part of the process of deciding to marry. Younger people show gender differences in attitudes, with men being less approving than women on the issue of cohabitation.

Collectively the Thorton and Young-DeMarco analyses provide evidence that Americans emphasize commitment to family, marriage, and children, and that a major portion of young people are planning to marry and bear children and take that commitment very seriously. Gender equality, tolerance of differences among people in society, and increasing freedom and acceptance have played important roles in the changing of American concepts of family. The decision to marry and have children is no longer seen as an expectation or necessity among most people in society, and many individuals are waiting longer to get married and start families. Divorce has become increasingly more accepted, however most Americans feel it should be reserved for fairly dire circumstances. Sexual relations among unmarried adults have become widely accepted and children born out of wedlock are not subject to the stigma of previous decades. Unmarried cohabitation has also become widely accepted, and some Americans have indicated it may be preferable to get to know a person before marriage by living with them. The majority of Americans, however, are not tolerant of extra marital affairs, and consider such acts to be immoral.

Thornton and Young-Demarco (2001) hypothesize that the increasing acceptance of people's remaining single and the greater restrictions placed on marriage may be a factor in people's waiting longer to marry and start having a family. A majority of Americans continue to indicate that men still have the primary responsibility for supporting the family, however acceptance of maternal employment has increased and fewer Americans view the children of employed mothers as suffering.

The present study was performed in order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between gender and attitudes toward self and spouse in adults. Parents make numerous sacrifices for their children. It is important to assess the extent to which mothers and fathers differ in how they perceive the burdens of parenting, in order to develop a better understanding of how to help parents adjust to their important role as nurturer. This study explored parents' perceptions of the various sacrifices they had made in order to raise a family, and assessed differences between how fathers and mothers responded.

This study also investigated whether women would score lower on measures of self-esteem and obtain more external locus of control scores than their male counterparts. An internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966) has previously been shown to correlate with better psychological adjustment in adults, as well as with adolescents and children (Morton, 1997). Many studies have focused on the relationship between parental and children's locus of control. Most of these studies show little or no evidence of a

consistent relationship (Ackerman and Ackerman, 1989; Barling, 1982; Davis & Phares, 1969; Hoffman and Levy-Shiff, 1994; Loeb, 1975). However, Ollendick (1979) did conclude that a child's' control beliefs were related to their parents' beliefs.

Several previous studies have noted these differences between men and women on both measures of self esteem and locus of control (Mwamwenda, 1995; Kling, Shibley- Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). However, other studies (Stein, J. A., Newcomb, M. D., & Bentler, P.M., 1992; Krampen, Galli, & Nigro, 1992) have failed to discern such gender differences.

Husbands' and wives' satisfaction with weight, sleep, and sex life were also assessed in the present study. It is widely assumed that women are more critical of their bodies and weight than are their male counterparts. This belief is offered as a way of explaining differential rates of eating disorders between males and females. It is also often argued that mothers perform a disproportionate share of child care duties, including attending to children when problems arise during the night. If this is true, we might expect more mothers than fathers to report dissatisfaction with the amount of rest they get. Differences between husbands' and wives' sexual expectations may create incongruencies between them in satisfaction with sex life after having children. This study assessed the accuracies of these notions comparing fathers' and mothers' perceptions of their weight, sleep, and sex lives.

Method

Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 171 parents. The sample consisted of men and women who ranged in age from 23 to 75 years (x=42.58, s.d.=9.58). The mean number of children for each parent was 2.09 (sons' mean age= 13.8; daughters' mean age= 14.4).

Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to subjects who volunteered at work or in their home neighborhoods. Participants were asked to fill out the packet in its entirety, and were assured that all responses would be kept strictly confidential.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their and their spouses' career and family experiences and expectations. These questions also required subjects to disclose information concerning their job characteristics and work preferences.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire (Greenberger et al., 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale along with subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al. 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to respond to ten 4-point Likert scale items concerning their attitudes toward their mother and father. Subjects were also asked to disclose information about their mother's work status during preschool years (0 to 5 years old) and school years (6 to 18 years old). The subjects were asked to report whether their mothers were employed part-time, fulltime, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development, and if their mother's work was out of financial necessity. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's position, indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue- collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

Part four of the questionnaire consisted of the Mini Markers Five Factors Personality Scale (Saucier, 1994), designed to give a quick assessment of the subject's personality according to the Big Five Trait model. This scale lists 40 alphabetized personality traits, 8 applying to each of the five basic dimensions of personality, including neuroticism (the general tendency to experience negative affect), extraversion (tendency to be sociable, assertive, active, and talkative), intellectance (tendency to display active imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, intellectual curiosity, and independent judgment), agreeableness (tendency to be altruistic, sympathetic, and eager to help others), and conscientiousness (tendency to be organized, strong-willed, and purposeful). The subjects rated the degree to which they possess each trait on a 9-point Likert-format scale.

Part five of the questionnaire consisted of five author-devised items assessing life satisfaction, using a 4-point Likert-format scale. On a similar 5-point scale, subjects were asked to rate various of their spouse's activities. Areas included child interaction, job, and relationship involvement. Participants with children still living at home were then asked to answer a series of questions regarding hours spent engaged in various activities.

Part six of the packet consisted of the 10-item Rosenberg Self Concept Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which was used to measure self-esteem. Subjects were asked to indicate on a 4-point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with statements assessing participants' perceptions of their self worth and competence.

The next part of the questionnaire, an author-devised survey, consisted of 40 items assessing the subject's perception of their child's esteem and activities, spouse esteem, and overall lifestyle. The first 14 questions asked the subjects to describe their child's personality using a 4-point Likert-format scale. The next 13 items asked the participants to rate their reasons for encouraging their children to participate in structured activities. The final 13 items asked the participants to rate their spouse's personality and esteem, as well as overall family functioning using a 4-point Likert-format scale.

The final portion of the questionnaire consisted of Ferguson's Brief Locus of Control Scale (Ferguson, 1993). This scale consists of ten forced-choice items excerpted from Rotter's Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966).

Results

Directionally adjusted items were totaled to create summary scores for self esteem and locus of control. High scores on the Ferguson scale indicate high levels of external locus of control.

Independent samples t-tests were performed in order to assess differences between husbands and wives on measures of self esteem, locus of control, and life satisfaction. No significant differences emerged between male and female respondents on measures of elf esteem, locus of control, satisfaction with weight, quality of sex life, sleep, or financial wellbeing.

Independent samples t-tests revealed significant differences between husbands and wives on measures assessing perceived sacrifices associated with rearing children. Husbands were more likely to complain that they had sacrificed time for exercise ($t=2.43$, $df=59$, $p< .05$). Males apparent greater interest in sports was consistent with wives' greater tendency to perceive their spouses as taking time away from family in order to view sports($t=4.49$, $df=58$, $p< .05$). Independent samples t-tests showed that wives were significantly more likely than husbands to report having made career sacrifices as a result of having children ($t=2.40$, $df=45.46$, $p< .05$).

Table 1
Percentages of husbands and wives who report sacrificing exercise as a result of raising children.

Males:	70%
Females:	55%

Table 2
Percentages of husbands and wives who report sacrificing careers as a result of raising children.

Males:	10%
Females:	29%

Male and female participants were analyzed separately Correlational analyses revealed a statistically significant negative relationship between husbands' self esteem scores and their locus of control scores ($r= -.46$, $p<.001$, $n=63$). Similarly, wives' self esteem scores were significantly negatively correlated with their locus of control scores ($r= -.41$, $p<.001$, $n=69$)

Table 1

Self esteem scores for all participants

	Mean	s.d.	n
Males:	76.71	15.45	51
Females:	74.02	15.59	65

Table 2

Locus of Control scores for all participants

	Mean	s.d.	n
Males:	14.31	2.24	49
Females:	14.54	2.11	59

Discussion

The failure to find expected gender differences in locus of control and self esteem was consistent with the Thorton and DeMarco (2001) research demonstrating increasing egalitarianism in the U.S. Similarly, contrary to expectation, wives and husbands reported similar satisfaction regarding their weight, sleep, and sex lives. These findings suggest that many gender differences may be evaporating between today's fathers and mothers. As parents increasingly share earning and child care responsibilities, previously observed differences in locus of control, self esteem, dissatisfaction with body image, and dissatisfaction with sex life may be proving to have been ephemeral.

The few gender differences that did emerge reflect areas traditionally linked differentially to the sexes: sports and career emphasis. The husbands in this sample of adults were more likely to devote considerable time to spectator sports. They were also more likely to feel that fatherhood had compelled them to sacrifice time for their own exercise. It is interesting to speculate about the possibility that viewing sporting events may contribute to men's expectations about how much exercise they want or need. These heightened expectations may translate to greater feelings of personal sacrifice. Another issue worth considering is why time devoted to spectator sports is not redirected to personal exercise. It is also possible that wives report less exercise sacrifice because they may perceive their child care responsibilities as providing opportunities for them to exercise. Involving fathers in exercise activities with their children may be one way of reducing this perceived sacrifice.

The wives in this sample were significantly more likely to report that they had made career sacrifices as a result of becoming mothers. This is consistent with other studies that have shown that women are more likely to prefer to stay home for a period following the birth of children, because they may place greater emphasis on nurturing than on career. Where it is economically possible for one parent to stop working, mothers are more likely to be the one to stay home. The apparent adverse professional impact of these decisions is suggested by the responses of the mothers in this sample.

A significant negative relationship was found between locus of control and self-esteem among married parents. There are several ways to account for this observed relationship. It may be that locus of control contributes to level of self-esteem. Those with an internal locus of control may succeed more because they take greater responsibility for outcomes, thereby improving their ability to learn from experience.

Over time, this might be expected to elevate their self esteem. Alternatively, self esteem may shape locus of control. Those who perceive themselves as more competent and worthy, and who therefore score higher on tests of self esteem, may be more likely to accept responsibility for the reinforcement outcomes of their lives. Another possibility is that personal success mediates responses on both measures. Higher life success may increase the likelihood of one's adopting an internal locus of control (because it is self flattering), whereas low life success may foster defensive externalization (because it is self protective).

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